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FIRST THROUGH TENTH TOPICS

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P U B L I S H I N G

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FOURTEENTH QUESTION: FUNDAMENTAL ARTICLES AND ERRORS

Are some theological topics fundamental, others not; and how can they be mutually distinguished?

The Socinians err in defect.

I. The question concerning fundamental articles is difficult and important. It has been discussed by many who have erred both in defect and in excess. The Socinians err in defect who admit very few fundamentals (and those only practical, the theoretical being almost entirely set aside) so that they may teach that the settling of the differences in religion is easy since they relate more to theological conclusions and to the dogmas of the schools than to fundamental articles of faith (which are both few in number and held substantially by both sides). Under this pretext they take away from fundamentals the principal doctrines of faith: as the doctrine concerning the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, the person of Christ, the satisfaction, etc. To this class the Arminians evidently belong who reduce fundamentals to those heads which are placed beyond dispute among almost all Christians and are contained in these three: faith in the divine promises, obedience to the divine precepts and a due reverence for the Scriptures.

II. Those who err in excess are both the papists who are impudent enough often to declare as fundamental their own hay and stubble and whatever the Romish church teaches; and the more strict Lutherans who (to render a union with us more difficult) extend fundamentals more widely than is just, turn almost every error into a heresy and make necessary those things which are indifferent so as more easily to prove that we differ on fundamentals.

III. The orthodox hold the mean between both. As they necessarily build upon some fundamentals, so they neither restrict them too closely, nor extend them too far.

IV. As in a house that is the foundation which has such a position that the house can neither be erected nor stand without it, so in religion that is the foundation upon which the whole of religion depends and it standing, religion stands; removed, religion falls. It is used in two senses: either simply and personally (applied to Christ the foundation of all salvation upon which the church and religion are built as upon a firm and immovable rock, Mt. 16:18; 1 Pet. 2:6, 7; 1 Cor. 3:11—"for other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ"); or comprehensively and naturally for the fundamental truth which all are required to believe and which is therefore called the foundation of faith. But this may be either widely extended to the first rudiments of the Christian religion (which were taught the catechumens for initiation and are called by the apostle the foundation [*themeliou*], or the principles [*archēs*]): such as repentance from dead works, faith toward God, the doctrine of baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment (Heb. 6:1, 2). These principles however have not an equal degree of necessity, some being necessary primarily and by themselves and others secondarily only and by reason of some other thing. In this sense, fundamental articles of religion belong to the decalogue, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the sacraments and the power of the keys because they contain the doctrine of salvation as necessary and fundamental without which we cannot receive the rest. Or strictly, it denotes the

essential doctrines of Christianity of which the theory (*theōria*) and practice is necessary simply as to the thing itself; or which are simply and absolutely necessary to be believed by all Christians and cannot be unknown or denied without peril to salvation. In this sense, we now speak of fundamental articles.

All articles are not fundamental.

V. Although all the truths revealed in Scripture are necessary to be believed as divine and infallible, yet they are not all equally necessary and the amplitude and extension of faith must be accurately distinguished here from its necessity. Not everything which belongs to the amplitude of faith must therefore belong to its necessity. All truths are not of the same weight. Some have a greater, others a lesser degree of necessity. For example, some are necessary by the necessity of means; others only by the necessity of precept. Some relate to doctrines strictly so called, others only to rites and ceremonies. One relates to some article or doctrine as to substance (for instance that Christ suffered and died); another to the same considered only with reference to circumstances (for instance, that Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate and was crucified between two thieves). For we might be ignorant of the latter without peril to our salvation.

Proof of this from Scripture.

VI. Scripture plainly intimates such a difference between articles (1 Cor. 3:11-13). Here Paul distinguishes the foundation from the things built upon it. In Phil. 3:15, he teaches that there are some doctrines about which Christians may differ without destroying peace and love. If anyone touches the fundamentals, he is subjected to this anathema: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8). In others there is room for Christian forbearance: "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye" (Rom. 14:1); and "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded; and if in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. Nevertheless, whereunto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing" (Phil. 3:15, 16). But as in faith there is a difference with respect to doctrines, so also in the law with respect to precepts there is a moral and a ceremonial necessity—the former is absolute and indispensable, the latter hypothetical and changeable.

VII. Hence some doctrines are necessary to be known simply for the existence of faith, others only relatively (*kata ti*) and for its well-being; some to the production of faith, others to its perfection (Heb. 6:1); some per se and absolutely to all whether babes (*nēpiois*) or perfect (*teleiois*) others accidentally only to these of full age (*teleiois*) and advanced (Heb. 5:13, 14). Some doctrines are relatively necessary to the instruction of others. This necessity again is to be taken in a certain degree of latitude according to the gifts, instruction, calling, sex and age, inasmuch as some belong to the flock, while others are pastors to whom are committed the oracles of God, whose duty it is to give instruction (*didaskēin*) and to convince the gainsayers (*tous antilegontas elenchein*, Tit. 1:9).

VIII. Again as one object of faith is general and proportionate (*viz.*, the whole word of God) and another special and peculiar (*viz.*, the doctrine concerning Christ with the dependant articles and the promises of God), so some doctrines of faith are primary and immediate; as the articles concerning the Trinity, Christ the Mediator, justification, etc. Others are secondary and mediate (or conse-

quent) hypotheses and conclusions springing from and deduced from the primary. Some are positive, affirming some true doctrine; as that Christ is the Son of God, that his death is a ransom (*lytron*) for our sins. Others are negative, rejecting what is false; as that the Mass should not be celebrated, that there is no purgatory, etc. With regard to these doctrines, some are necessary to be believed publicly and formally, as the special and proper objects of faith (primary and immediate doctrines and positive articles concerning the principal head of faith); others only implicitly and virtually.

*A threefold error,
against the
foundation, about
it and beside it.*

IX. What we have said about articles of faith may be said of the errors to which they are opposed. As all truths are not of the same necessity, so all the wounds which are inflicted upon the truth are not therefore deadly, nor is every error capital. Hence we distinguish errors into three kinds: (1) against the foundation; (2) about it; and (3) beside it. An error against the foundation is that which directly overturns one or more articles of faith (i.e., one which denies the divinity of Christ and the Trinity of persons). An error about the foundation is that which does not indeed directly deny a fundamental article, but yet maintains an opposition, which standing, the article indirectly and by necessary consequence is overthrown; as that which teaches the existence of God, but does not recognize his providence (because providence being removed, God is taken away). An error beside the foundation is one which either does not touch the foundation at all or has reference to it only by a remote and obscure consequence and is occupied about problematical and curious questions, neither revealed in the word nor necessary to be known. Such are the doctrines which Paul calls "hay and stubble" (1 Cor. 3:12*), which can stand with the true foundation. These will not hinder the one professing them from being saved, although he will suffer loss.

X. One error directly, at first and immediately overthrows the foundation; another, indirectly, secondarily and by consequence. The former is undoubtedly the greater of the two. Again, an error can overturn the foundation indirectly and by a proximate, evident, necessary consequence; or by a remote, evident and wrested consequence. The former is certainly a deadly error, not so the latter. Thus the papists do not directly attack the sufficiency of the satisfaction of Christ and justification by faith and other like doctrines; but indirectly and by consequence (though evident and necessary) oppose it by their errors concerning the merit of works, their own satisfactions, the sacrifice of the Mass, purgatory, etc. They who quietly rest in the terms of an implied contradiction where there is opposition in apposition and a contradiction in the addition are to be regarded as overthrowing the foundation no less than those who directly attack it.

XI. An error which by inevident and violent consequence is deduced from any doctrine (or which they who hold the doctrine seriously and piously detest) cannot with justice be imputed to them. For instance, those with which the Reformers were charged (i.e., that they made God the author of sin, that they denied his omnipotence because they would not hold to the ubiquity of Christ's body, that they converted the sacraments into mere signs because they denied the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper), cannot be lawfully ascribed to them. These errors neither follow—but are only supposed to follow—nor are evident and innate consequences which may be deduced from the true doctrine

of the Reformers, but are wrested against their intention and instead of being received are condemned and rejected by them.

XII. There is a verbal error (about phrases only) and a real error (about the doctrines themselves). The former cannot be fundamental because "it is heresy concerning the understanding, not concerning Scripture" (Hilary, *The Trinity* 2*.3 [FC 25:36; PL 10.51]). The sense, not the words, gives character to a fault. As Jerome says, "The gospel is not in words of the Scriptures, but in the sense, not on the surface, but in the marrow, not in the leaves of words, but in the root of reason" (*Commentariorum . . . ad Galatas* 1 [PL 26.347] on Gal. 1:11, 12).

XIII. It is one thing to speak of doctrines and principles of theology; another to speak of their conclusions and consequences. The knowledge and assent to the latter is necessary indeed to theologians that they may have a richer knowledge of divine things for the confirmation (*kataskeuēn*) of the truth and the overthrow (*anaskeuēn*) of error. But they are not always necessary to Christians in general and can be unknown by them without endangering their salvation. But when we speak here of fundamental articles, we do not mean those which are explicitly necessary to be known by the perfect man (the man of God) so as to fill up the measure of his duty and name; but exactly those which every believer and Christian must believe in order to salvation.

XIV. Some have only the necessity of means, others only that of precept. The former compose the foundation of themselves and primarily; the latter are secondarily built upon the foundation which strengthens and confirms them. The former are absolutely and always necessary; the latter relatively. Without those salvation cannot be obtained; but without these it can. Nor does a simple privation of these ensure condemnation, but only the contempt, such as the sacraments.

XV. We must distinguish between the body of substance of an article or doctrine and its mode and circumstances. The substance of a fundamental article neither can nor ought to be unknown and always remains the same, but it is otherwise in relation to the circumstance or mode, the ignorance of which is not, as a matter of course, damning. Hence an error is either about the substance of a thing or about the mode, circumstance or degree; either about the fact (*to hoti*) or about the how (*to pōs*) and the wherefore (*to dioti*). It is true that sometimes when the mode is altered the thing itself is taken away because the mode enters into the essence of the thing and forms a part of it; as in practice, he who takes away the mode of divine worship enjoined by God overthrows the worship itself (Mt. 15:9). He who takes away the mode of redemption by the ransom (*lytron*) of Christ (the mode of justification by faith) overthrows redemption itself and justification. But it is also true that an error as to the mode and circumstances may not be hurtful to the thing itself. For example, the Greeks were convicted of an error about the mode of the procession of the Holy Spirit; nevertheless they held to the doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity of the Spirit.

XVI. Faith may be considered either according to the plenitude and degree of light or according to the multitude of things to be believed. In the former respect, faith could increase in proportion to the measure of revelation and be fuller under the New than under the Old Testament economy, but not in the latter because in this sense faith is unchangeable (Eph. 4:5) and "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8).

XVII. The doctrine concerning Jesus, the son of Mary, the true Messiah, is not a new article of faith as to substance and *in thesi*, since they of old believed that the Messiah would come. But it is only a special determination and application of the prophetic oracles *in hypothesi*.

XVIII. Some subjects are fundamental in themselves; others become so only accidentally when they run into some fundamental topic. For example, circumcision is not in itself fundamental, but it becomes so when it is made necessary for salvation and runs into the doctrine of justification. In this sense, the apostle inveighs against the false apostles (who wished to retain the use of circumcision) as holding a deadly error (Gal. 5:2, 3). So also the article concerning the Lord's Supper is not of itself fundamental, yet it is rendered such by the papists when they make it a propitiatory sacrifice for sins.

XIX. The following things must belong to fundamental articles: (1) that they be catholic, for the things necessary for the salvation of everyone are required for a universal faith (according to the Athanasian Creed "whoever wishes to be saved must above all things hold the catholic faith; for unless it is held entire and inviolate he will perish forever" [cf. Schaff, 2:66]); (2) that the belief of the catholic truths necessarily draws salvation after it; and the ignorance of them, the entire doubt of danger, the impious and heretical denial, is damnable; (3) that believers cherish a true consent to them, nor do some think differently from others because if anyone thinks or speaks otherwise he is subjected to the curse (Gal. 1:8). Hence where a difference in fundamentals exists, there cannot be union. (4) That all theological doctrines be reduced to them as to a rule which the apostle calls the analogy of faith (*analogian pisteōs*); (5) that they be primary and principal truths upon which all others are built as upon a foundation—and being removed, faith itself is overthrown; not secondary and less principal, by the removal of which faith is only shaken.

*The criteria
of fundamental
articles are drawn
from the nature
of the doctrines.*

XX. The criteria for distinguishing fundamental and non-fundamental articles can be derived from the nature and condition of the doctrines themselves (viz., those which contain the necessary causes and conditions of salvation, both the end and the means necessary to that end, since, if the causes are denied, the effect is also taken away and the means being denied, the end cannot be obtained). Hence as the grace of God by which we are elected, the merit of Christ by which we are redeemed, and the Spirit by whom we are sanctified are the principal causes of salvation and faith the instrumental (Jn. 3:16, 17), repentance and conversion to God the necessary conditions (Heb. 6:1*; Mt. 3:2), we say that all these doctrines are fundamental.

XXI. Second, fundamental articles can be derived from the declaration of Scripture. For those would certainly be considered fundamental the knowledge of which is called necessary and saving, and the ignorance or denial deadly. Such are the articles concerning the one and triune God, both positively (Jn. 17:3) and negatively (1 Jn. 2:23); concerning sin (1 Jn. 1:10; Eph. 2:1); concerning the person, nature and offices of Christ (1 Cor. 3:11; Acts 4:12; 1 Jn. 4:3; Eph. 2:11, 12); concerning the gospel (Rom. 1:16, 17; Gal. 1:8, 9); concerning faith (Heb. 11:6; Mk. 16:16); concerning justification without works (Rom. 3:27; Gal. 2, 3); concerning sanctification and the worship of God (Eph. 2:10; Heb. 12:14); and concerning the resurrection and eternal life (1 Cor. 15:14; 2 Tim. 2:8; Rom. 10:9).

XXII. The third mark of fundamental articles can be drawn from the Apostles' Creed in which the ancients gathered together from the apostolic writings the substance of fundamental doctrines. Hence the name "Symbol" was given to it because it is as the mark or sign as it were of Christianity. We must however carefully note: (a) that it cannot be an exact mark of fundamental articles because it treats only of theoretical articles relating to faith, not of practical articles relating to worship; (b) that the things to be believed are not found here in so many words (*autolexei*) and explicitly, but implicitly by consequence and analogy: for example, although nothing is said about the grace of God and the satisfaction of Christ, nothing about providence, conservation and the like, yet they may easily be deduced from what is said; (c) that the Symbol is not to be considered only with regard to the words, but as to the sense (because, as Hilary says, "The Scriptures do not consist in the reading but in the understanding," *Ad Constantium Augustum*, II,9 [PL 10.570]; and "fundamentals are not found in the words but in the sense," as Jerome says). Therefore although heretics may say that they receive the Symbol, yet they do not because they reject its true and genuine sense. So Sabellius, Arius, Macedonius and other anti-Trinitarians formerly professed (to no purpose) in the words of the Symbol their faith in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, while they endeavored to overthrow this very doctrine not by secret attacks, but by open warfare. The Socinians of our day and their disciples are doing this. In vain do the papists profess their belief in it, who corrupt the meaning of the various articles concerning the sufferings and death of Christ, his descent to hell, the catholic church, the remission of sins and the like.

XXIII. Although theology is both theoretical and practical, yet the Socinians are wrong in saying that fundamental articles can be distinguished from non-fundamental by this one criterion alone—the obedience due to God and Christ or the seal for piety and good works (because not only are the commands of duty necessary to salvation, but also the doctrines of faith, as we learn from Jn. 20:31 and 2 Tim. 3:16). Hence, as there are practical fundamental articles, so there should also be theoretical.

XXIV. Although some of the orthodox hold to more, others to fewer articles of faith, they do not differ in reality, but only in the words and manner of proposing them. Some bring them into more general and summary classes; others classify them more particularly and as to parts (*kata merē*). Hence some limit the foundation of salvation to the sole truth concerning Jesus Christ as our crucified Redeemer from 1 Cor. 2:2; this however, embraces many others. Others limit it to the two concerning the knowledge of God and of Christ from Jn. 17:3. Others again extend them to four heads, theoretical as well as practical; others to six. But they all agree in these fundamental articles: the doctrines concerning the sacred Scriptures as inspired (*theopneustō*), being the only and perfect rule of faith; concerning the unity of God and the Trinity; concerning Christ, the Redeemer, and his most perfect satisfaction; concerning sin and its penalty—death; concerning the law and its inability to save; concerning justification by faith; concerning the necessity of grace and of good works, sanctification and the worship of God, the church, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment and eternal life and such as are connected with these. All these are so strictly joined together that they mutually depend upon each other. One cannot be withdrawn without overthrowing all the rest.

The question concerning the number of fundamental articles is rash and useless.

XXV. The question concerning the number of fundamental articles which our adversaries have proposed, besides being rash (since Scripture says nothing definitely about it) is also useless and unnecessary because there is no need of our knowing particularly the number of such articles, if we can prove that they err fundamentally in one or more. And this can be done easily with regard to the papists, Socinians, Anabaptists and similar heretics.

XXVI. Nor does it follow from this that the perfection of Scripture in necessary things is detracted from, nor that the rule of ecclesiastical communion is wanting among us. For the Scriptures do not cease to contain most fully all things necessary to salvation, although their number is not accurately set forth. The truth of the fundamental articles (which should be to us in place of a rule) may be clearly deduced from the criteria mentioned above.

XXVII. When the orthodox sometimes maintain that the fundamental articles are few, this must not be understood absolutely and simply, but both as to the principal heads. Taken collectively (*syllēbdēn*), these are few in comparison with the papists (who largely increase them) making the canons of the church, the publicly received dicta of the schools and the traditions of the fathers into articles of faith, any departure from which involves one in the guilt of heresy.